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“THE REAL COLONEL HOUSE”¹

BY FREDERICK W. HENSHAW

It was undoubtedly due to the growing restiveness of the American people against a man who, without official position, is sent on secret missions of vast consequence to their welfare,—who has never done one act or uttered one word by which the people might gauge his capacity,—that the world is indebted for this unique volume.

It is unique in that, while in form biographical, in its essence it is autobiographical. First published as a serial in a New York paper, it is not to be doubted that if there were one line of it which failed to meet the hearty approval of Colonel House, that line would have been deleted before the book was put before an eager public. Therefore it is that we are justified in saying that we have Colonel House's autobiography: his own estimate of himself, from his own lips, of his character, his accomplishments, and his achievements.

That the Colonel is a great man, a very great man, one of the very greatest of men yet born of woman, is now established; he says so himself, through the pen of his intimate biographer. No matter what here follows, the reader must not let his mind be shaken from its grasp upon this fact, for it is the keynote of the volume.

To jar this keynote ever so slightly off its pitch is to turn the harmony of the paeans of praise into harsh discord. Even to ask where in any chapter, page, paragraph or sentence this fundamental statement is established, is to eviscerate the whole book. Therefore, in this review, quite too brief, the reader is requested to cling with all his tenacity to this basic concept: the supreme greatness of Colonel House; and if at any time or for any reason his strength

¹ *The Real Colonel House*, by Arthur D. Howden Smith. New York: Geo. H. Doran Co., 1918.

shows signs of failing, let him call on Arthur D. Howden Smith, the gifted author, who will lash him to the mast of his own superb conviction.

Colonel House was born in Texas. We can but regret that it was not Missouri, for then not alone would we have been told of his greatness, but we would have been shown it.

He is “more misunderstood than mysterious.” Yet that misunderstanding or mystery was of early origin. His school friends say that as a youth he exercised his abilities “as a pacificator in smoothing out student rows.” The Colonel himself, however, “scouts the idea.” What did he do? He tells us himself: “When I was younger I used to like to set boys at each other to see what they would do and then try to bring them around again.” Here the first tender bud of his genius is put forth. Like the boy Napoleon with his toy soldiers, like the boy Mozart with his spinet, like the boy John Stuart Mill with his scholastics, we have our hero “setting boys at each other” and then “trying to bring them around again.”

Here, then, is the touch-stone of his character, the solvent by which all mysteries shall be resolved. The little Eddie Fix-it that was has grown into the great Colonel Fix-it that is. Whether he “set” the nations at each other in this war to see what they would do, and so to give just scope to his matured, full-fruited genius for fixing, is left in obscurity; but no obscurity attends the statement that he foresaw this war long before any other living human being. This must be true, for a whole chapter is given to an elaboration of the statement. That chapter is called “Foreseeing the World War,” and we are told that “Three months before the war actually broke out” the President “sent Colonel House to Europe to endeavor to convince the several Governments of Germany, France and Great Britain of the danger of the existing situation.”

Poor, stupid statesmen of England, of France, and—aye—of Germany, too, not to perceive what Colonel House so plainly foresaw! How, and by what learning, wisdom, gift of prevision or secret source of information he acquired this uncanny foreknowledge, we are of course not told. “He was not a good scholar.” We must infer that this astounding acumen was due to sublime genius, which so often is unable to analyze its own processes. Deplorable is the state of mind of that doubting Thomas who shall say

that such *ex post facto* prophecies are always easy; that he can make them himself.

But all this is irregularly set forth. We should follow Colonel House's own method of declaring what manner of man he is for the better understanding of what he has done. This is announced in the opening chapter, and from that chapter we present Colonel House's estimate of Colonel House.

He holds a power never wielded before in this country by any man out of office, a power greater than that of any [*other is omitted*] political boss or Cabinet minister. He occupies a place in connection with the Administration which is anomalous, because no such place ever existed before Woodrow Wilson became President of the United States.

True, perfectly true. Now for the justification:

Colonel House is not in politics for himself; he plays [*sic*] politics because he loves politics, because he cannot resist directing men and policies, any more than the born artist can keep his hands off paint tubes and brushes. [A born Fixer, you see.] He is one of the two or three greatest Americans of this political generation. . . . There is ample excuse [*sic*] for assigning him credit as chief adviser in the formation of all the President's important decisions.

Tut! tut! Is that tactful on the part of the Great Fixer? How about Messrs. Gompers, McAdoo, and the official advisers, the statesmen of the Cabinet? Conceding its truth, should this "most tactful man," of "crystal-clear vision," have told this in so blunt a way? Is it diplomatic? However, perhaps, the extraordinary use of the word "*excuse*" is the diplomatic safety-valve.

In business he would be called not a man of mystery, but a wizard. . . . Whatever he puts his hand to has a way of working out satisfactorily. . . . He is a political genius, this gray, quiet-voiced man with the shrewd, unwinking eyes and the level voice. In Europe already they are speaking of him as the foremost expert in international politics among the statesmen of the Entente Allies. They believe in him because in 1914 and 1915 he prophesied things which occurred in 1916 and 1917. . . . He foresaw the world war a year before it happened.

There we have it. How wondrous, yet how unsatisfying! He has the gift of prophecy, and he has prophesied. The "things" prophesied (except the coming of the world war) we are not told, any more than we are told the name of "they" in Europe who place so high a stamp on his genius.

Not only are we not told their names, we are not even told when or where they said these things. A somewhat extensive reading recalls no word of anyone to such effect. These eulogiums must be hidden in the Colonel's "confidential papers."

We do not wish to be hypercritical, but here duty compels us to speak of one cloud in the limpid clarity of the biography. We have just referred to it in connection with the last quotation—"In Europe already *they* are speaking of him." Unceasingly the Colonel tells us such facts: "'He has shown that he is a great man,' said a corporation head"; but we are not enlightened as to who the "corporation head" is.

"The people who know the real Colonel House believe that his greatest attribute is his statesmanship"—but who are these men? "Before the campaign was over," said a member of the committee, "some of us had come to the conclusion that Colonel House was about the biggest man in the works." Again that titillating indefiniteness. Why all this secrecy on the part of a man whose most conspicuous characteristic is "perfect frankness"? So with pain we say that while the reader will find that "those who know," and "every well informed person," and "those who are behind the scenes," and "a British statesman" and "a French diplomat," all bear testimony to the Colonel's superb genius, he, alas! will also find that no one of them is named—except, of course, President Wilson. But doubtless this is but an expression—the efflorescence of Colonel House's "modesty."

But while the Colonel was exercising his prophetic gift, why in Heaven's name did he not foresee our own inevitable embroilment in the war and do something to get us just the least bit ready for it? Certainly when a man can prophesy this world's war a year before the statesmen of any of the European nations could see its first threatening shadow, and, besides this, can prophesy other "things," it should not have strained the machinery of his mystical lore to tell us that we, too, were bound to become involved in it. Yet the political slogan of the President and Colonel House (for so the biographer consistently brackets their names) was, "He kept us out of war," thereby certainly conveying the idea that he would continue to do so. What was the matter with the Colonel's vaticination-works that they did not tell us the truth? It cannot be that this "crystal-visioned man" of

"uncanny intuition" knew that war was inevitable and simply camouflaged us, the people, with "He kept us out of war," merely because he "loves to play politics." No—this explanation will not do, because he is an "extraordinary man of rigid fairness."

We must leave this matter in perplexity and hurry on to state that "he nominated and elected four Governors of Texas." True, the biographer concedes that few, if any, even in Texas, knew this; but that is not because he is a "pussy-footer" in politics, but because of his "excessive modesty," which makes publicity abhorrent to him. Besides that, there are limits to the frankness of our very frank statesman. "There is a certain point beyond which Colonel House will not reveal the inner secrets of his strategy." How unjust to a world on tiptoe of expectation! After this, how can it be said that he is not a man of mystery?

Goethe wrote wisely of the "many-sided man." More and more is it revealed that the Colonel is such a one. He is not mysterious, yet he has the "gift of prophecy" and "uncanny intuition." He is fair, candid, and open, yet he "will not reveal the inner secrets of his strategy." That invaluable knowledge will die with him. He is modest beyond words and despises publicity; but "he understands the art of securing and holding publicity, one of the most difficult arts of the politician, to a degree that Colonel Roosevelt cannot exceed." We need no exemplar of his practice of this "art." His book furnishes all that is required.

He "discovered" Woodrow Wilson after having been disappointed in Gaynor. We had thought that Colonel George Harvey was the discoverer, but let that pass. He planned the result of the nominating convention exactly as it developed. True, he was not near the convention at all; he was on the ocean. True, he could not have been a promoter of Bryan's treachery to Champ Clark unless it had been prearranged before he left; true, he was never considered as having any weight except with the Texas delegation, but "he had mixed the necessary dynamic human forces in the great political retort, and he let them simmer and boil. It is rather uncanny that these dissimilar interests should have been united as he had planned. That is, it is uncanny until you remember the previous occasions when his touch, light and unnoticed, had worked with the same unflinching sureness." How does he accomplish these marvels?

You shall know: “He almost never makes mistakes. When he does they are instantly rectified, frequently even turned to account.” There’s the secret! The Sheriff of Nottingham was a tyro in comparison.

What wonder that Wilson was twice elected! Who could not be elected under the guidance of this priceless political prodigy?

But it is as a statesman that Colonel House now stands before the nation, and it is to the record of his achievements in statecraft that we turn with avidity. And to do this, we must hurriedly and regretfully pass over his formation of the Cabinet. Bryan, “of course,” was to be Secretary of State; Burleson and Gregory were both “trusted lieutenants” from Texas. Secretary Lane, also, he is responsible for—so responsible that it is a pain to know that Mr. Lane had never met the President up to the date of the first Cabinet meeting, at which “he had to introduce himself.” The Colonel could have had any place but Bryan’s.

To prepare us for his marvels of diplomatic achievement we are told that “there are few scholars of the Eastern States, few great international lawyers of the Eastern bar, who have as wide a grasp of world affairs as Colonel House.”

Now that starts him off all right, and we are prepared to note results. We have already referred to his visit to Europe to explain to the statesmen of Germany, France, and England that there was going to be a war unless they “watched out.” On that trip he saw the Kaiser. He had first learned all he could about him from “men like Benjamin Ide Wheeler.” Benjamin Ide Wheeler is on record over his name in the suppressed *Fatherland* as declaring that when history comes to be written the Kaiser will be found guiltless of having caused the war. Small wonder, then, that the Colonel, “like other observers” (still that aggravating vagueness!), “is disposed to believe that the Kaiser’s rôle was negative.” The Colonel reaches Germany, and “has an audience with the Kaiser at Potsdam, an event of surpassing importance.” Yet the visit was “only referred to” in one or two newspapers. Think of that! But how and why was it an “event of surpassing importance”? Not one word of explanation is vouchsafed. You must take it on faith. There’s statecraft and open diplomacy for you!

So Colonel House returns and in due course all the devils of hell are let loose on earth. The military men of the Allies

all believed and declared that the war would be a long one. General Kitchener, it will be remembered, placed its duration at not less than three years. Yet "the President and Colonel House, like most well-informed observers, looked to see an end of hostilities after a few months of swift fighting."

This explains much. It explains that the President and Colonel House thought, as Germany did, that she would win in one fast and furious drive. It explains why we were enjoined to remain "neutral in thought as well as in deed." It explains much more that it is not desirable to dwell upon. But it does not explain why the Colonel should have made such a mistake; why his powers of divination should here so completely have broken down. But this is not all, nor yet the half. "After the Battle of the Marne," we are told, "it became apparent to the President and Colonel House, as it did to practically every unprejudiced person who had facilities for knowing the inside facts, that Germany had shot her bolt." The Lord certainly had this nation in His tenderest care, if such in fact was the belief of our President! But again we have the same irritating vagueness: "like most well-informed persons." Who? "Practically every unprejudiced person." Not one named.

The *Lusitania* is sunk, the food-blockade is declared by Great Britain, the submarine warfare announced by Germany, and again Colonel House goes abroad on one of his secret missions—no salary, only expenses paid. He went first to Germany and there invented the phrase "The Freedom of the Seas." Well, maybe he did not exactly invent it, since it had been used for much more than a hundred years and was in every man's mouth in our War of 1812, but he pretty nearly invented it; or, at any rate, he was the first to use it in connection with this war. But let the Colonel tell it through his intimate biographer:

They [the German statesmen] gave him fair words, but no satisfaction until he extended, as a fisherman casts his bait, a certain phrase of five words: "The Freedom of the Seas." So far as can be determined, Colonel House was the first to use this much-debated phrase, at least in its connection with the problems raised by the present war. No previous mention of it has been found.

There's statecraft for you. The Colonel almost invented a "certain phrase of five words" that had been in common employment in discussions of international maritime law for much more than a hundred years.

But there is more. He gave his own meaning to the phrase, and with the meaning, a proposition to Germany. “He meant a literal, unlimited freedom of the seas, the uninterrupted progress of the world’s ocean-borne commerce” by all belligerents as well as neutrals. Navies were to be used solely “for defence against invasion.” “A vista opened before the eyes of the leaders at Berlin” and they accepted the new interpretation. They not only accepted it, but received it with “prompt and enthusiastic assent.” “Vista” is not the right word. It was an earthly paradise that our great authority on international law offered to Germany. Small wonder the German statesmen enthusiastically “accepted” it. They would have been in the same class as the proposer of it had they not. Fancy Germany suffering the pangs of hunger, her commerce destroyed, her navy bottled up, not a vessel on any ocean, being told by an accredited spokesman of the President of the United States that her commerce could be re-established to the full, her merchant ships move at their pleasure to fetch and carry whatever she might need or desire, that even contraband of war would be abolished and that all the dominating British fleet would do would be to “repel invasion”! Surely it was a diplomatic victory for Colonel House to get German statesmen to embrace his new “Freedom of the Seas.”

He next goes to England to win her acceptance to his great idea. But alas! Bungling Germany had spilled the beans. Germany had instructed her Ambassadors “to bolster up” Colonel House’s “doctrine” by an active propaganda, and they had begun to talk about this new freedom as though it was their own idea, even before Colonel House reached London. And what was the result? We are gravely told that British statesmen thereupon rejected his great idea, as being some “new species of Berlin deviltry.” In vain the Colonel expounded that the nurseling was the child of his own fertile brain; he even established by “proofs” “that while he had suggested the idea in Berlin on such and such a day, the speeches [of Von Bernstorff and others] had been delivered in America on subsequent dates.” But even this conclusive demonstration of the *soundness* of the idea failed to win the British statesmen. They “shied instinctively” from his new freedom of the seas. Shied from it! Rather the only surprise is that they did not kick the whole wagon to pieces. Fancy the “crystal-clear vision,” the “marvelous

reasoning power," that could bring a man to the belief that the nation dominant at sea would forego all rights and advantages which were hers under international law by virtue of her naval supremacy, wholly and solely in the interest of a desperate, unscrupulous adversary with whom she was at death grips! Yet the master statesman believed she would, and believes she declined only because she feared some "Berlin devilry"! Picture also the adroit course which this "uncannily adroit" man pursued. He knew "German diplomatic stupidity." So knowing, the ordinary man would have put his great thought before England first, recognizing that if he won her over to his "doctrine," Germany would jump at it like a hungry trout; while, if he could not win her over, it would be fruitless to spend the nation's money in going to Berlin. But, being a genius and a great statesman, Colonel House took the dear child of his brain first to Berlin only to see it slaughtered, not ruthlessly, but unintentionally, in the all-smothering embrace of "German diplomatic stupidity." How interesting it would be to get the German and British views as to where the stupidity lay!

Here, then, we are obliged sadly to record one mistake of the man who never makes them, or, if he does, promptly turns them to advantage. For we are not advised how he turned this one to anything but cause for merriment.

So the great Fixer comes back once more, only to go again to Europe on one of his momentous missions. And this time what was it? One designing to hold him up to public ridicule could not have invented a mission for him more preposterous than that which he himself declares took him abroad. It is well-nigh unbelievable. You begin to wonder if your own mind has gone astray. Here it is: "He tried to convince both sets of belligerents of the advantage to each of them in keeping the United States out of the war." Read this again, and then picture the self-imposed undertaking of this genius in statecraft. That the Central Powers would not have welcomed the inestimable aid that our wealth, our army, our navy, our food, our munitions, would have been to them; that the Entente Powers would not, with just rejoicing, have hailed that aid as being the determinative factor in the war! Reason staggers at the task Colonel House set himself, and it is unnecessary to record that this was his third failure.

But a fourth time he sails. It has become necessary to

straighten out the Allies' war mistakes. At this time the Colonel was the head of a large and growing bureau studying every sort of international question—even to locating Alsace and Lorraine on the map of Europe. All this in anticipation of the Peace Conference at which he was to represent the United States. But he springs to arms at the call of the President, dons his military title, acquired by the gift of one of those four men that he made Governor of Texas, and goes to Europe; a warrior this time, not a diplomat, nor man of peace. We are not directly told that he originated the idea of single unified command. History already written is a little too specific on this question, and Lloyd George's name has been prominently mentioned in this connection. But at least the Colonel did present a cable from the President advocating the plan of unity of action. We need not doubt the force of that cable. But he did more than present the President's instructions. He did two things more. As the “Head of the American War Mission,” he cut off all oratory at the conference of the representatives of the Powers and “suggested to M. Clemenceau the same method which he had used in Texas politics. Oratory was arbitrarily shut out.” Think what he did! The great statesmen of Europe would have frittered away time, opportunity, the war itself, in their lust for oratory, if the Colonel had not been there literally to “choke them off.” Small wonder this mission is described as “the most successful of its kind which the United States has ever sent abroad.”

The other thing the Colonel did was himself to make a speech. Not that he wanted to, but only to show that he could; and “of course as long as he had to do it, he did it well.”

The speech is given in full. In view of the occasion, if any high-school boy in the United States had not done better, his anguished parents would have taken him out of school and put him to sawing wood.

Such are his diplomatic achievements, and we are now prepared to estimate the debt we owe to his statecraft.

1. He went to England, France and Germany to convince their rulers that there was going to be a European war—and failed.

2. He went a second time to convince both sets of belligerents that it would be to the advantage of each if we kept out of the war—and failed.

3. He went a third time seeking acceptance of his amazing "doctrine" of the new "Freedom of the Seas." Germany enthusiastically welcomed it. With Great Britain—he failed.

4. He went a fourth time and presented cabled instructions from the President urging acceptance of Lloyd George's plan for unity of control of Allied war operations. In April of this year that plan was finally put into effect by giving General Foch supreme command. He also cut out oratory, according to his "Texas plan."

5. With a bureau of paid assistants he is studying the "Problems of Peace."

We can now glow and thrill with his biographer, who says:

Every conceivable sort of problem comes within his ken. . . . To know Colonel House at close range is to know the reason for his unbroken chain of success in diplomatic work abroad. He has the *savoir faire* which so many Americans lack, and his unusually wide acquaintanceship and close study of men of all classes have given him the ability to get along in any company. He has always been as much at home, whether dining with King George in Buckingham Palace, chatting with the Kaiser at Potsdam, or lunching at the Elysée Palace, as he was in the days when his library in Austin was the gathering place of the men who governed Texas.

Hats off, gentlemen! One minute for silent thanksgiving!

It is regrettable that the space necessarily consumed in this exemplification of the Colonel's statecraft denies us the pleasure of presenting others of his marvels of achievement, as his masterful management of the first Wilson campaign, when "'Let Theodore Roosevelt elect us,' was the way he summed up his strategy." We cannot, however, omit mention of his classic telegram to Bill McDonald after Colonel Roosevelt was shot: "Come immediately. Important. Bring your artillery." And Captain Bill's reply: "I'm comin'."

There is a type of novel, common in these days, wherein the hero is portrayed as being everything that is brilliant, witty, sarcastic, epigrammatic, forceful and virile. The authors are for the most part women. The description of the hero is found in the first chapter. You read on anticipating a treat when the marvelous man begins to talk, and lo! you are met with nothing but banalities and platitudes.

So, alas! it is with *The Real Colonel House*. Despite all the vast learning, profundity of thought, advanced ideas, gift of prophecy, clarity of vision, and marvelous genius with which his historiographer accredits him, the most indulgent scanning of the Colonel's own utterances fails to disclose one thought, one phrase even, that arises above the dreary level of the commonplace.

The last words of the Colonel are:

I have always wanted to die with my boots on. I dread the thought of dying in bed. You know, I'm a frontier Texan after all.

The Colonel may put aside his dread. Being, as we are told, “excessively modest” and “singularly reluctant to talk about his own triumphs,” all that he need do, when he thinks his time has come, is to pull on his boots and read his book. Thus to a virtual certainty he would realize his ambition.

FREDERICK W. HENSHAW.